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A. David Lewis

Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, a.lewis@mcphs.edu

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Abstract

This is one of a series of film reviews of *Black Panther* (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler.

Keywords

Black Panther, Marvel, Race, Superheroes



It would be easy, after *Black Panther* crossed a billion dollars in the box office worldwide and has transcended into a cultural phenomenon, to overlook the movie itself opening with a story that leaves an unanswered question. In the fetchingly visual Marvel Studios manner, almost fifty years of evolving backstory is condensed into a fluid opening animated sequence. This introduction to the mythos is so functional and brief—viewers are immediately disoriented by then transitioning to mid-’90s Oakland, California—that only the essential details are likely remembered: the vibranium, the dissenting Jabari tribe, the origin of the Black Panther title, and Wakanda’s isolationism. The vanishing frame for this vignette is a young boy asking his father, his *baba*, for a story. The father’s voice is that of N’Jobu, telling his American-born son Erik the “fairytale” of his homeland. When N’Jobu explains that Wakanda must still remain hidden, the boy

who would become both the film's villain and, for many, its touchstone poses the key question: *Why?*

A number of early reviews of *Black Panther* have centered on the moral conflict at the center of the film: T'Challa, played admirably by Chadwick Boseman, may be the title character of the movie, but when does he actually become its hero? True, he begins the piece already as the fully trained and active Black Panther (previously seen in *Captain America: Civil War*), but a trip to the "Ancestral Lands" is required before he can assume his slain father T'Chaka's place as king. Later in the story, Erik Stephens, the black ops agent known as Killmonger and lost prince of Wakanda, makes his own journey to this mystical plane, and it is here that the narrative is signaling to its audience that there is no comfortable protagonist to be found. Both T'Challa and Killmonger can be the Black Panther; both can touch the afterlife and return empowered. Just as they clash physically for Wakanda's throne, they do the same narratively, conveyed by their respective encounters with the souls of their fathers.

Writing for *The Wrap*, Phil Hornshaw and Phil Owen note that "the 'ancestral plane' is not a term used in the comics, but the closest comic book equivalent concept is probably the D'Jalia," a spiritual realm and place of all Wakandan memory.¹ Introduced only in recent years by *Black Panther* series writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, it operates as a transcendent sacred space and final destination for at least the royal family. As part of the ceremony to become king

and Black Panther, however, it serves as a site of transformation. Killmonger's history of murder and chaos does not prevent his access to this place of power; for that matter, neither does T'Challa's.

Said another way, access to the Ancestral Lands is not a sign of moral reward, since both men are encumbered by gross injustices. Killmonger's is the most apparent: he has engaged in horrific, violent, and cruel behavior: but, when Wakanda's isolationism slides from defense to potential negligence, one may ask if he is the movie's villain or its casualty. In director Ryan Coogler's previous film *Creed* (2015), audiences were squarely on the side of Michael B. Jordan as Adonis, another lost prince to a dead father, namely boxing royalty Apollo Creed. In *Black Panther*, though, audiences are presumed to support T'Challa from the start but only until the unanswered (and half-forgotten?) question at the film's opening is addressed. Why has Wakanda remained isolated? Why has it not come to the aid of black peoples worldwide? Why did T'Chaka choose to leave Erik behind after killing N'Jobu?

That is the burden and the question with which T'Challa must return to the Ancestral Lands. In many ways, he has swapped positions with Killmonger: the outsider is on the throne and T'Challa is among the outcast, not Americans but the Jabari. In this position, T'Challa angrily voices the boy's question: "Why?," asking both why Wakanda remains apart and why his own nephew was abandoned. For the ghostly T'Chaka, Erik was "the truth I chose to omit." Even if

Killmonger's is a lifetime of violence, T'Challa's is now revealed as a legacy of cold indifference.

Reporting for *The Verge*, Shannon Liao corroborates this sentiment, with South Carolina-born Boseman himself saying that T'Challa was, in some fashion, the film's antagonist. "It's the enemy I've always known. It's power. It's having privilege' [...whereas N'Jobu and his son] are essentially shut out from Wakanda's Afrofuturistic utopia because they want to share it and extend its freedoms to other people of color around the globe, instead of hiding the country's prosperity from the world."²

Something must change, and it is in T'Challa's second visit to the Ancestral Lands that it does. Notably, instead of being covered with ceremonial sand this time, T'Challa, on the brink of death, is buried under ice from the mountaintops. The idea of being left unburied is raised more than once in the film, both when T'Chaka takes N'Jobu's life and when T'Challa himself is thought dead. For a body to be left unburied sounds nearly worse than death and, of course, is seen as such in some cultures. Yet, it is not the priests and acolytes who perform this second ritual but his mother, his sister, and his beloved. Killmonger exhibited all the signs of a misogynist, yet T'Challa is surrounded by women. (As Jeffrey Kahan pointed out in his review for *Sequart*, while T'Challa's personal guard may be the all-female Dora Mijae and his sister a super-scientist, the

Ancestral Lands only features a lineage of male rulers: “the ultimate prize is reserved for men”).³

A less mediated and truer journey may be under way this time. And, whereas previously each man returned as Wakanda’s king, now T’Challa arises as its superhero: He chastises the generations of Black Panthers before him, “You were wrong! All of you were wrong—to turn your backs on the rest of the world. We let the fear of our discovery stop us from doing what is *right*. No more!”

T’Challa and Killmonger vie for being the protagonist of the movie through their visit to these Ancestral Lands. T’Challa’s return there, as he lays dying but surrounded by his loved ones, both wrests his role as the protagonist back from Killmonger and fully launches him into the status of superhero. With this second trip to the Ancestral Lands, T’Challa now has the narrative’s full approval as well as its moral legitimacy.

All this only makes Killmonger’s demise at the end that much more disturbing. In what *Boston Review* writer Christopher Lebron calls “a macabre scene meant to be touching,” Killmonger opts for death rather than be healed by Wakandan technology and then to be subject to Wakandan justice. It is an unqualified death, a silent fall, one that is not accompanied by any vision of an afterlife or a better world. “The sun sets on his body as it did on Michael Brown’s,” intones Lebron.⁴ He will be cast into the sea like his enslaved

ancestors. No posthumous or post-credits scene plays where the film narrative returns to Erik's soul. There will be no burial.

Ben Dixon, writing on *Black Panther* for *Progressive Army*, pinpoints that “[t]his is exactly the complex narrative with which the director wanted the audience [to] grapple. Wakanda was as much a part of the problem as they were the heroes of the story.”⁵ This also makes Killmonger as much a savior as the monster of the story. Ultimately, as underscored by the employment of an afterlife setting, Erik is also its tragedy.

¹ Phil Hornshaw and Phil Owen, “‘Black Panther’: Could the Wakandan Ancestral Plane Have Something to Do With a Hidden Infinity Stone?” *The Wrap*, 15 February 2018, <https://www.thewrap.com/black-panther-ancestral-plane/>

² Shannon Liao, “Chadwick Boseman Says T’Challa Is the Enemy in *Black Panther*,” *The Verge*, 28 February 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/28/17063218/chadwick-boseman-tchalla-enemy-black-panther>

³ Jeffrey Kahan, “Politics, Power, and the Black Panther: A Commentary,” *Sequart Organization*, 5 March 2018, <http://sequart.org/magazine/68337/politics-power-and-the-black-panther-a-commentary/>

⁴ Christopher Lebron, “‘Black Panther’ Is Not the Movie We Deserve,” *Boston Review*, 17 Feb 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/race/christopher-lebron-black-panther>

⁵ Benjamin Dixon, “The Most Important Moment in *Black Panther* No One Is Talking About,” *Progressive Army*, 18 February 2018, <http://progressivearmy.com/2018/02/18/important-moment-black-panther/>

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